

BRIGADIER GENERAL PAUL BONTRAGER: Okay, good morning.

I am U.S. Army Brigadier General Paul Bontrager. And I was appointed as the investigating officer for this investigation, following the U.S. airstrike in al-Jinah, Aleppo province, Syria on March 16th of this year.

Joining me on the investigation were military officers and civilian specialists who assisted me as subject-matter experts in intelligence, targeting, joint fires, and legal matters. None of us were involved in the strike or the decisions leading up to the strike.

As the Army Regulation 15-6 investigating officer per the appointing order, it was the role of our team to gather information surrounding the facts of the al-Jinah strike, analyze those facts, and provide recommendations to the commander.

As always, there are ways to improve the strike processes and base our investigation. This is what we found in this case. Although we did not have access to the scene, the investigative team interviewed dozens of people. We reviewed all available video and images, operational reports, and intelligence reports associated with the strike, while researching all regulations, standing operating procedures, commander's guidance and other pertinent information.

We simply were following every bit of information to see where it led, leaving no stone unturned. We finalized our report findings and recommendations, and now that it is complete, we are following through with our promise to be open and transparent, which leads us to this media opportunity today.

We want to tell you what we can about what we found in the investigation, with the exception of classified information, of course.

Okay? Now, I'll take a few moments to summarize the facts, details and findings of the investigation.

On the afternoon of March 14th, 2017, intelligence indicated that Al Qaida and Syrian militants would be attending a meeting with Al Qaida leaders from the region near al-Jinah village, Aleppo province. On March 15th, our forces received additional intelligence which reinforced the likelihood of a meeting taking place in the immediate future.

On the afternoon of March 16th, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance assets confirmed reports of a meeting forming in the specific building that intelligence had pointed to previously. Of note, this is an ungoverned area of Syria that is not in the control of the Assad regime government, nor under the control of any militias that we support in the fight against ISIS. It is a confirmed and well-known Al Qaida operational area.

Once it was confirmed the meeting was imminent, the dynamic targeting process began with the intent to strike the target building while the Al Qaida meeting was in session. At that point, a strike cell began working to support the target engagement authority. The target engagement authority — this is the individual with the authority to approve the strike. The strike cell took the process for action to ensure all information was made available before the final decision to strike, and of course, that any strike could comply with all laws and regulations.

The strike cell confirmed that the meeting was a valid military target and that the target could be struck proportionally to avoid unnecessary collateral damage. When the target engagement authority believed he had complete information, he made the decision to conduct a kinetic strike. The strike came from above by F-15 Strike Eagle aircraft and MQ-9 remotely piloted aircraft.

The F-15s dropped 10 bombs on the building and the MQ-9 shot two missiles to strike a target that emerged outside the building. The munitions penetrated the building and caused superficial damage to adjacent structures. We are unable to ascertain exactly how many individuals were killed. We estimate approximately two dozen men attending an Al Qaida meeting were killed in the strike with several injured.

Importantly, this investigation found that the strike complied with operational and legal requirements. The strike hit an Al Qaida meeting. We simply found no credible information to discredit the initial intelligence.

GEN. BONTRAGER: Sadly, we did assess that there was likely one civilian casualty. Our assessment is due solely to the individual's stature relative to other fighters attending the meeting. We believe the individual was a male and through — and though the evidence is not conclusive, he was not a fighter.

There is a possibility he was a civilian. We are unsure if that person survived, but we do believe that he was injured in the strike at a minimum.

One of the factors we were tasked to explore in this investigation was whether reports of large numbers of civilian casualties were true. In short, we considered media reports that indicated a large number of civilians were killed, but our investigation did not uncover evidence to support those claims. We are not aware of large number of civilians being treated in hospitals after the strike. We are confident this was a meeting of Al Qaida members and leaders. This was not a meeting of civilians.

Next I will draw your attention to the image that was released to the public after the strike and consider some of the discussion around that photograph. That picture that I'm told you have there in front of you, shows pretty dramatically that our bombs struck a building between a small building and a larger building that appears to be under construction. The small building on the left is a small mosque that sustained slight damage. The larger building on the right is also mostly untouched. One of the things this image shows us and our investigation validated was that the strike was remarkably precise.

The munitions struck the exact building they were intended to strike and did not cause significant damage to adjacent structures. And I will avoid classified details, but the effects visible in the photograph are evidence the bombs were appropriately fused to limit collateral damage. You can see that vehicles parked outside the building are still intact and right side up. You can see that the mosque was slightly damaged but left standing. You can see that the adjacent larger building was left mostly untouched as well. The target, a meeting of Al Qaida, that we aimed for was the only structure that was hit.

To summarize up to this point, those are the basic facts and conclusions of the investigation. Now, I will talk about our findings and how the investigation shows that there are things we could have done better. Moving forward, we need to be as hard on ourselves as the situation requires, ensuring we improve in the future, and there were things that did not meet our highest standards.

A concern from the strike is that all the best information did not make it to the target engagement authority at the time he had to make the decision about the strike. A word here about dynamic versus deliberate targets. Once a target is deemed a fleeting target, a series of decisions and timelines follow.

Dynamic targets drive immediate actions. Setting the scene of — seeing the — setting the scene in a certain way creates a lens, for instance, through which intelligence indicators are interpreted and

deciding a target is a dynamic target accelerates the process, which sometimes, if not vigilant, can cause a rush to the most obvious answers.

In this case, when the decision to strike was made, the target engagement authority was not made aware that the small building on the left was actually a mosque or that this complex of buildings under construction had, under normal conditions, a general religious purpose.

What we determined afterwards was that the building on the left of the image you have there in front of you was a small mosque in a complex in which a new larger mosque was under construction, more specifically the Omar al-Khatib mosque. None of the buildings were annotated on our no-strike list as category one facilities, which is a register of entities that must be carefully evaluated before an approval to strike.

GEN. BONTRAGER: Again, looking at the photo in front of you, you can clearly see — you can clearly see the building that was struck. And you can see the small mosque to the left.

Now, if you look to the right of the building that was struck, you can see the larger building. That building is actually attached to the building we struck by a stairwell and a breezeway walkthrough. These two buildings, the one we struck and the larger building that we did not strike, were both under construction and actually had a religious purpose.

We believe the building we struck was intended to be a school or madrassa, and the larger building a future mosque. We have a responsibility to identify and characterize no-strike entities as accurately as possible and provide this information to decision-makers in a timely manner.

To summarize, neither the small mosque nor the two buildings under construction were on the category one no-strike list. The small mosque certainly should've been, and I will come back to this point in a moment.

As previously — as previously mentioned, the failure to identify the religious nature of these buildings is a preventable error. This failure to identify the religious purpose of these buildings led the target engagement authority to make the final determination to strike without knowing all he should have known. And that is something that we need to make sure does not happen in the future.

Let me reemphasize, the investigation found that at the time of the meeting, the structure hit and the people who were targeted were valid targets because they were engaged in an Al Qaida meeting. They were using the religious facility for an Al Qaida meeting.

When that is determined, it is not a difficult process to seek authority to strike a target that is being used at the time for militant purposes. Since the target engagement authority did not know it was a religious complex, he never invoked the process to remove the category one no-strike protection.

Most frustrating was that some of the intelligence team did know this was a religious complex, but the analysis did not get to the no-strike list nor to the target engagement authority.

A more deliberate pre-strike analysis should have identified that the target was part of a religious compound. Having that information could have been relevant to the target engagement authority's decision to strike.

Before engaging a no-strike list entity, there are further approvals that need to be granted. In this case, the real time use of the meeting place for an Al Qaida meeting would have permitted the strike. But the target engagement authority should have had all the information needed to make the more informed decision in real time.

Our standards are simply higher than that. One of our team's recommendations would require buildings under construction be granted the same protection status as their intended end use.

Finally, a couple more topics. Our team recommended we pay particular attention to manning associated with shift changes and manning related to our red team of skeptics who play a valuable role in getting to good decisions with agility.

On shift changeovers, the investigation found irregularities that contributed to a lack of situational awareness, knowledge and understanding among the strike cell individuals. Specifically, important information was not adequately communicated during personnel changeover to the incoming shift.

We also found an imbalance of subspecialties assigned to the strike cell. They did not have in place to best possible complement of experienced trained people who could have better developed and vetted the information in front of them, even in a — a dynamic strike.

Therefore, we recommended a manpower review be conducted to ensure the right mix of personnel are assigned to the strike cell and are present at the right place at the right time. I think implied here is an understanding of the desire for us to have the most robust, red team possible process to apply to every strike. Red team is military speak for experts who are given the challenge of asking the toughest questions, providing a skeptical eye to the analysis as it forms in real time. This is not a situation where individuals are overly deferential to rank or position.

There is an expectation, rather there is a requirement for anyone to speak up and question any facts, assumptions or decisions at any time throughout the strike process. Our team believes that a robust red team environment was lacking on the strike floor. There should have been more questions asked. We should have — would have given the target engagement authority a better chance to make decisions with full knowledge of the intelligence and information available at the time. These are not things that we can get wrong as we work to ensure the individuals who make the decisions whether to strike have the best and most complete information in front of them when they need it. The best red team is an important mechanism to allow us to make the best decisions.

In conclusion, we struck our intended target and — and eliminated several Al-Qaida terrorists. Though our investigation identified some critical information gaps that contributed to a misinformation and an overall lack of understanding of the situation, we ultimately struck a blow against Al-Qaida. But that does not excuse us from taking a hard look at what we could do better, particular in terms of process and procedures. We hold ourselves to a high standard. We cannot let desire for good results degrade our standards. We need to get it right and with certainty and we will. With that, I am happy to take your questions. And let me add, if I don't adequately answer your questions, please re-ask them there. I'm here to provide full visibility as I see it and I don't — I don't want — to — be let off the hook on a hard question although I might regret saying that later.

CAPT. DAVIS: Oh they won't let you off sir, I assure you. We're going to start with Phil Stewart with Reuters.

Q: *Just first of all, you said you interviewed dozens of people. Were any of those people connected to the — were actually in — in — on the ground at the time? Or were these all, you know, officials involved in the strike? And did you speak to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights which has a very different assessment of the people that were killed. And then lastly, could you give us any information on the individual, this lone individual civilian who was wounded. How do you know? Did you see him in a video feed leaving the compound? How do you know about that lone individual?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: OK, Phil. So I — (inaudible) — three parts there. Let me start nugging away at this, if I don't get it right again please come back and re-ask. So, the — the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, no, we did not speak to — to anyone there. We did reach out to the organizations that had published different documents, for example, the Human Rights Watch asking for any information that they had with regard to the strike. To again, try and get — gather any evidence that was out there and that offer still stands for Human Rights Watch, Syrian Observatory, anybody else who has something we would — we would be — we would welcome. We would welcome it. Can you repeat the other parts of the question please?

Q: *Well just on that one point, so did you speak to anybody who was actually on the ground. You said you spoke to dozens of people. How do you — how would you characterize those people?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Right. So we did not — we did not speak with any — anyone on the ground in Syria except for the — the individuals in the unit that conducted the strike. We simply didn't have access to — to anyone in the location of the strike. So — so the answer to that is a simple no. We spoke to dozens of people throughout the process — the approval process, the strike cell, as well as — as anyone who had any — any information with regard to the — the intelligence available or the — or what else was available.

Regarding the last part of your question, which I think concerned the lone individual. Let me be completely clear here, what we — what we saw was a small-in-stature – smaller-in-stature person accompanying an adult, clearly an adult, into the meeting site. And that alone is what — what we saw that made us call this individual a civilian.

However, it should also be known that this was known to the target engagement authority pre-strike. He was identified — the T.E.A. — the target engagement authority was aware. The proportionality assessment was made, and it was still deemed a legal strike. So with regard to that, the proper authorities were — were consulted.

Q: *And you don't believe he's a child? They aren't ready to say that. You think he might have been an adult?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: I frankly don't know — don't know who he was. It was a civilian is how we're characterizing him.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay. Next to Bill Hennigan, the L.A. Times. Bill, make sure you speak up.

Q: *Okay. So, you didn't talk to anybody on the ground and nobody visited the site. Is that — that correct, right?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: That is correct, Bill, and that's common. It's a rare thing with strikes like this that we can get on the ground in person, or that we can talk to anybody on the ground is not uncommon at all.

Q: *Can you talk a little bit about what — what you actually did sit through in order to come to the conclusions that you did?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Yes, Bill, so we — we sifted through every — from the initial time when intelligence was made available about the strike, we sifted through every bit of e-mail, documents, chat screens. It was as comprehensive as we could. There was nothing that was possible to be presented that we did not look at. We looked at all available video over the — that was available considering this target.

This was a fairly quick-turn target once the — the events, once it was determined dynamic. And then it was over very rapidly as well. So, the individuals involved in it, it was both in-country forward and elsewhere with the strike cell. Those are the folks we — we focused on with regard to determining what information was available at the time and whether or not the target engagement authority had that information.

Q: *That strike cell is in — is that in Erbil or Syria?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: The strike cell is the cell that had the responsibility for conducting the strike in this situation. And they're primary role is to inform the target engagement authority.

Q: *Where — where — is it in-country?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: I don't believe that's in the scope of what I'm going to discuss today.

Q: *Okay. So — so if — and you also mentioned that there was a shift changeover. So approximately how long did this process take — take through? And also, on top of that, you know, there was — last year, we had a strike where Syrian forces were accidentally hit because of a changeover, because information did not make its way from one — one staff to the next.*

Were there any learned lessons that were applicable in this particular incident?

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, this — this particular event took place over days, as I said — three days total. Once the event itself, the dynamic strike process began, that's when it was a matter of hours and that's when it was a very quick turn. And during that process, there were a couple of key individuals that swapped out. That's what I'm talking about with regard to shifts — shift-change.

It wasn't like a full-scale, you know, group of people got up and left and a new group came in. That's not what I'm talking about. He's talking about certain — certain folks that swapped out and again, we're being — maybe being unfairly critical of ourselves, but they simply could have done a better job passing information from one individual to the next.

Q: *And the learned lesson from that Syria strike last year?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: All other strikes and investigations inform our processes. This is — this is how up to this point we're able to have a remarkably high amount of success. I mean, literally thousands of strikes with a tremendously small percentage of strikes that go poorly. So any other investigation definitely informed the process up to this point.

However, every — every process, every event is unique and I only know the particulars about this particular one right here.

Q: *Okay. You said that there were members on the team that perhaps knew that this was — could be on the no-strike list. And that that information did not find its way to the right authority. Was there anybody — was there any — has anybody been reprimanded or punished as a result of this oversight?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, let me go back and clarify something. None of these buildings — the small mosque, the — the building we struck, or the larger mosque under construction — none of them were on the no-strike list. What we're saying is that there were people in the process that had — that had identified that the small mosque as a mosque. That mosque should have been put on the no-strike list, but it wasn't.

Let me be clear also that there was no requirement to address the — the status of that small mosque because it was not to be struck. We weren't — there was never a plan to strike it. So that — that was fine. The bottom line is it should have been on the list and it wasn't on the list.

Regarding the building that was struck and the larger mosque, the one — the building under construction, by letter of the law, there's no requirement that they had to be on the list as well, because they were not — they were not completed structures.

What we're saying is — common sense, and in fact practice up to this point, we have had times similar to this where somebody was savvy enough to say this might be a religious structure; let's treat it as a cat-1 no-strike structure, even though it's not on the list. And they would have pushed it up higher for authority.

The problem that we have with this one is there were people that saw the mosque, the small mosque, didn't add it to the list immediately when they should have. And there were other people that looked at the building to be struck and the building to the right of it, the larger building, with skepticism and thinking this might be religious in nature, and they didn't raise that concern either.

So the bottom line — and that — and that ultimately was one of our recommendations. And that was we believe, and that is a change that is being codified in regulation, that anytime a structure, even under construction, is deemed to possibly have a no-strike category of protection, it immediately gets that level of protection. You don't wait until something is done and that sort of thing.

So that is — that is an area that we think we can do better. And again, we're — I can't speak to whether or not it would have changed the outcome. What I can speak to is the information that was available to the target engagement authority was not as complete as it could have been. And we need — those individuals, we need to give them every benefit with regard to every bit of information that is available and we simply did not do that in this case.

Q: *So there were no letters of reprimand or any punishments doled out?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, I'm — I'm glad this came up because I did not include this in my opening statement. But — but I wanted to address it. And that is also that there was no negligence found at any part of this investigation. And again, this is — this is not some — this is not an investigation that we just breezed through.

We sifted through every detail. There was not — there was no negligence found. There was no, sort of, anything malicious at all that could be determined. So none of our recommendations reflected that anyone should receive any sort of reprimand.

That being said, that's not our decision anyhow. It is a command decision and whether or not somebody was reprimanded is — is — is again not for me to say.

Q: *(inaudible) — just lastly — (inaudible) — was there any HVIs there at the strike?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: What we know with certainty is this was an Al Qaida meeting and there were Al Qaida regional leaders present.

Q: *Thank you.*

CAPT. DAVIS: Next to Tara Copp, Stars and Stripes.

Q: *Hello. (inaudible) — most of my questions, but if a madrassa — if the adjoining buildings had been known as a madrassa, potentially a school, that would have also put them on the cat 1 list. Is that correct?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: You're — you are exactly right, Tara. That would have afforded them cat 1 no-strike protection.

Q: *OK. I actually — (inaudible) — did actually ask most of the questions that I had.*

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay. We'll go to Lucas Tomlinson, FOX news.

Q: *General, knowing everything that you know now, would you still have conducted the strike?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Well, Lucas, that is a hypothetical that I — I don't think is — I'm in a position to — to answer.

Q: *Is it?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: What I can speak to — did you have another question?

Q: *Is it a hypothetical? Knowing what you know now, would you go back and do the strike at the same time, same place using the same assets?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Lucas, yeah, that's — were I a target engagement authority, I think that would be a more appropriate role for me to answer. I was not the target engagement authority. I did not have the real time information flowing in as it — as it was coming in. I can say with all certainty that at the time of the strike, before the strike, at the time of the strike and now, it remains a valid military target and it remains a — a legal strike.

Q: *So you would do it again, or the targeters would do it again if presented the opportunity at that time and place?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: I simply do not — do not — I'm not in position to answer that question, Lucas.

Q: *And lastly, was striking this target, considering it was Al Qaida regional leaders, was it worth it given the proximity to these other religious structures?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, Lucas, I think you're talking with regard to proportionality and it was certainly determined a proportional strike with regard to — to the Al Qaida meeting that was in place. And again, let's go back to review what we had, which was a — credible intelligence of this Al Qaida meeting with — with leaders present. And if you can imagine what that means with regard to pay-off — possible pay-off and a blow to Al Qaida in the area. It would possibly be significant and that was the mindset moving forward that day.

Q: *Thank you very much.*

Q: *Can I jump in real quick?*

CAPT. DAVIS: Sure.

Q: *Just as a follow on that. If the buildings would've been on a do-not-strike list, how is it still considered a legal strike now, just to clarify?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: OK. A very — very relevant question to — and I'll try and explain that. So, the fact that something is on the no-strike list does not mean that it cannot be struck, it just means that it requires a different process and a different approval.

So, any structure, madrassa, or other — or any other structure at all, if it's being used for a military purpose can be struck. It is a — it can be a legal target to strike. It simply has to go to a different level for approval authority.

And that — that did not happen in this — in this instance.

CAPT. DAVIS: We'll go to T.M. Gibbons-Neff, Washington Post.

Q: *Thanks for doing this, General. First question, were there any non-DOD assets involved in the targeting of this meeting?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: This was a solely and completely DOD strike, T.M.

Q: *Got it. And — and we talked a lot about accountability. But who exactly would be held accountable? Which command was this?*

Was it an Air Force strike? Was it a special operations strike?

GEN. BONTRAGER: T.M., this — this was in fact a — a special operations task force with responsibility in that — in that region.

Q: *Got it. And last question, kind of regarding this shift changeover and people aware of that it might have been a mosque. It just sounds like, with everything that you're saying, that there was no clear pattern of life established on this structure before it was struck. Is that kind of what you're talking about by being the cutting corners?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, the intelligence that — that — that brought us to the point of — of considering the strike, and then the — the surveillance that was placed over the — the building location gave the team a high level of confidence that knew — they knew precisely who was in the building and what the target consisted of. So — so, I would say that the pattern of life was certainly suitably established prior to this strike.

CAPT. DAVIS: Next to Lolita Baldor, Associated Press.

Q: *General, I just wanted to make sure you — other than this one smaller-in-stature person, do you have a high degree of confidence that the only people killed or injure were al-Qaida members or a — how high of a confidence are you that those who were killed were injured were al-Qaida members? And I guess, just to — and — and how do you reach that conclusion if other groups suggest they were not?*

And you weren't able to talk to anyone on the ground. How certain can you be that they were all al-Qaida members?

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, so, Lita, in — in a — I'll — I'll just have to come back to the — the intelligence that was available to us before the strike, at the time of the strike, and post strike. And every effort we made to gather evidence, talking to anybody who anything to provide with regard to this — to this strike.

And we've simply found no — zero credible evidence to discredit the intelligence. And that includes additional intelligence collected post-strike regarding the strike itself.

CAPT. DAVIS: OK, Nancy Youssef, BuzzFeed.

Q: *You mentioned that there were a series of recommendations. Can you tell us how many recommendations there were? Who those recommendations go to? And who — and if — who determines whether to follow through on them? And what happens if they're not followed through?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So Nancy, the — the recommendations go to the — the commander of the — of the unit that — that assigned me to do this investigation. And it is completely his responsibility to determine which — which recommendations to follow and to follow up to make sure that they are — they are implemented.

And the — and I'll run down a brief summary of the findings that I — I — I mentioned in my earlier dialogue. There was the overarching problem of incomplete information flow to the target engagement authority. There was the problem that we found of individuals swapping duties in the strike cell without an adequate hand-off of available information as well there.

There was the category one no-strike list issue, where individuals had noticed that the — there was a small mosque not on the strike — no-strike list and did not immediately add it. And there was other individuals that suspected that this was a religious compound under construction and they didn't bring up somewhat of a common sense approach of should this be considered as a cat 1 structure. So that was another significant thing that we found.

There was the manning review. There was a couple positions that, and again we are — we are being somewhat harsh on ourselves, but there were people that we thought could have been more experienced and — and could have been more emboldened with regard to their duties in the strike cell. So that's — that's something else that we pointed out.

And the last — the last point was about the overall environment — the climate in the strike cell has got to have — it has to be almost an argumentative environment where folks are — are pointing out things and regardless of rank, they're — they're being critical of — of each other.

So — so those are the — the — the main parts and I would — and to the best of my knowledge having talked to the commander, I believe each and every one of those has been acted on in a positive way. But if I can go back, all the things I just talked about with regard to passing of information and not being bold enough to speak up and that sort of thing, that's what we're talking about here. This is not a place where we found any negligence on any individual or group of individuals.

Q: *What unit is that? And how long were they in charge of the strike operations in Syria?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: I'm sorry. Can you repeat the question please.

Q: *Which unit did this — did this report go to? Or who requested it? And how long are they in charge of such operations?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, this is a special operations task force and they are in charge of these operations throughout several theaters forever.

Q: *(inaudible) — but is it a specific unit that like a brigade or a battalion? Or is it — does it transcend that? That's what I'm trying to understand.*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Yes. You're right. It transcends that. It is a special operation task force.

Q: *And then you mentioned regional leaders that were targeted. Can you give us any more specifics? Did they know the names of the people who were there? Or was it a belief that a group of regional leaders were there? And when you say “regional,” what does that mean? What kind of responsibility do they have within Al Qaida?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: Yeah, right. And that’s sort of specific — specific parts of the intelligence that we simply can’t talk about. But very confident in the intelligence that was available at the time.

SPEAKER: So we’ve got time for one or two more questions.

CAPT. DAVIS: Yeah, we’ve got a couple of follow ups.

First from Tara Copp.

(CROSSTALK)

CAPT. DAVIS: You’re good.

And next from T.M. Gibbons-Neff.

Q: *Yes, back to the special operations task force for just a few minutes. I assume that that’s JSOC. Did the engagement or the approval for this engagement ever leave that task force? As in, did anyone else in CENTCOM review the information prior to the strike?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: So, the — the approval process worked correctly when we’re talking about the level that it went to, except for the removal of the no-strike protection. That’s one that should have — that should have been elevated that wasn’t.

Other than that, everything was done at the correct level.

Q: *And that level was within the task force?*

GEN. BONTRAGER: It was within the strike cell at the appropriate level.

CAPT. DAVIS: All right. I just wanted to check with the operator to make sure we didn’t have anyone dial in from out of town that wanted to ask anything.

OPERATOR: If you would like to ask a question, please press star-one. One moment.

CAPT. DAVIS: We may not have anybody there.

(CROSSTALK)

CAPT. DAVIS: Yeah, well, I think CENTCOM might have had someone dial in from down there. But I don’t think we have anybody in the category, but just checking.

Okay. Last call for anyone else.

General, thank you for your time in doing this. I know (inaudible) down at CENTCOM will be available for any follow ups you may have.

Thanks, everybody.

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